

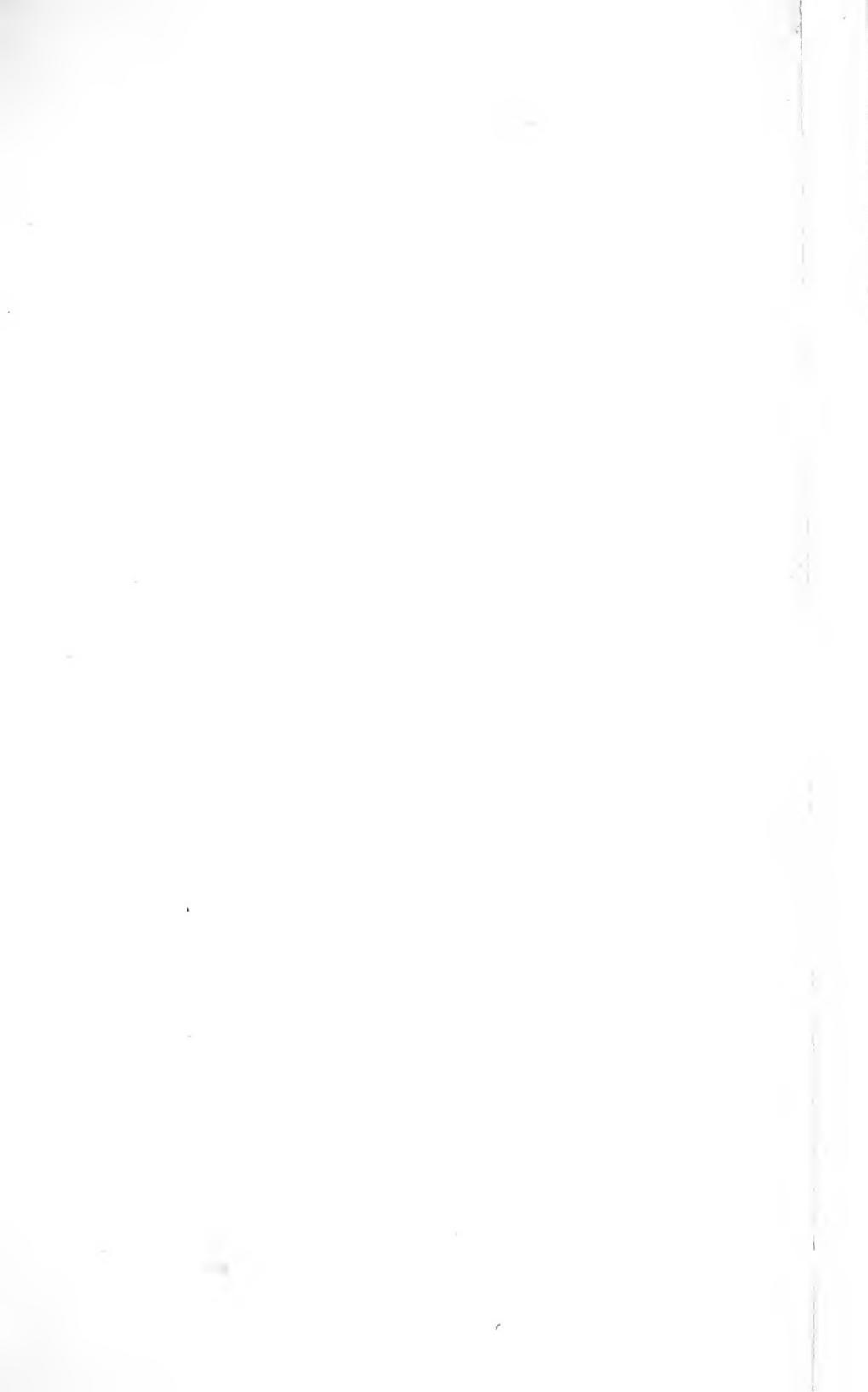
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THE OLD MOTIVES

AND

THE NEW MOTIVES IN RELIGION  
CONTRASTED.

BY

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BOSTON.

c

Rev C. D. Bradlee

July 18. 1893.

"The object of the American Unitarian Association shall be to diffuse the knowledge and promote the interests of pure Christianity; and all Unitarian Christians shall be invited to unite and co-operate with it for that purpose." — ARTICLE I. of the *By-Laws of the American Unitarian Association.*

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WHAT are these old motives to religion? They scarcely need naming. They have all one spring for their origin and one purpose in their operation. They originate in the assumption that man is in a lost state, fallen from a state of innocence so complete that the moment he knew anything he discovered that he had destroyed himself because he did not know anything. In other words, the effort to know "what was good and what was evil" had left him with the perilous knowledge, but without the power to make any use of it for his own advantage,—the first instance of higher education at the expense of practical life. What a very simple fiction is here, destined to overthrow the self-respect of the human race! This is the starting-point of every motive to religion of that older type. A totally depraved human nature speculates upon the possibility of its further ruin, and admits that it cannot save itself. It hears now the command, "Be fruitful and multiply, and replenish the earth;" and if its reasoning powers had not gone down in the general reduction of moral values, it would know that such a command would be equivalent to lifting all restrictions from contagion and pronouncing a blessing on the spread of disease. But here appears not the logical conclusion that self-destruction is

the whole duty of man, if he is capable of no good thing ; but instead there is revealed to this fallen creature by the baffled Creator that what he cannot do, and what God could not do the first time He tried, has now been made possible, and a system of nicely graduated forfeits has been adopted in Heaven for the regulation of earth,— a system which begins in human sacrifices to an inhuman deity, and ends in a sacrifice in which the sufferer is at once the victim, the priest, the Saviour, and God himself. Henceforward man's debt is paid, and “heaven is opened to all believers” who can believe the impossible. Was there ever in the history of religions a more complete wreck of reason and failure of common-sense ? It justifies the characterization of it given by Macaulay : “It is the perpetration of an impossible offence to be paid for in an inconceivable coin.”

Now, it is not for a moment to be understood that this brief statement is the whole history of this doctrine of the recovery of man by religion. It is instead the resultant of the speculations of the Church since the days of Anselm, — the Church that professes to speak for historic Christianity. Of course, we perfectly know that no such scheme can be injected successfully into the Old Testament scripture, where, after the telling of the stories of the creation which Hebrew thought had borrowed, it goes on to work out life's problems in a practical conflict between the authority of the priest and the moral passion of the prophets. We know with equal clearness that no such scheme is hinted at by Jesus of Nazareth in any record of his thoughts remaining to us. That record gives us indubitable proof that his one purpose was to convince the spiritual nature of man that it had inalienable rights in the fatherhood of God. Therefore, he has no theory of the “Fall of Man,” and tells the sublimest truths of his religion,

— the fatherhood of God, the universality of religion, and the spirituality of worship,— to the humblest and least respectable of the common people who surround him ; and he gives as his justification that these things are not for “the wise and the prudent,”— the sophisticated and the canny, “but for babes,”— simple people, who are nearest to the naturalness of life. Nor did the early Church lay the burden of this rescue of man on any metaphysical compact worked out in what Jonathan Edwards, with unconscious humor, called “The Social Trinity.” For nearly eight centuries the early Church entertained as its theory of atonement a dramatic plan of attack, in which, as in a stupendous duel between the Son of God and the Prince of this world, the apparent overthrow of the heavenly champion is the real defeat of the earthly usurper and rebellious ruler of the earth.

When later the profligate youth of Anselm turned to piety with “the precipitate of the young blood,” the tides of his repentance flowed in on his thought of God ; and the divine wrath to be appeased was in the exact ratio of the sense of sin to be forgiven. It was an illustration of that acute remark of Fontanelle, “God made man in his own image, and man has ever since returned the compliment by making God in his.”

There is nothing sacred about the fashions in theology which should make them objects of reverence. They do not bear upon their front the shining stones of the high-priest’s breastplate, in the glitter of which we are to discover the will of God. It has been a part of the tyranny exercised upon the minds of the unlearned that they have been led to accept as of divine authority those shifting theories of atonement which have left man still struggling with his sin. God was to be satisfied, but at the expense of the growing discontent of his children.

One word is the synonym for the motives moving toward religion in all this ; and that word is “ fear,” — fear of God, for his wrath is hanging over unrepentant man ; fear of sin, for it is the suggestion of an evil power which divides the sovereignty of the world with God, a Frankenstein which defies all efforts of its author to control it ; fear of life’s delights, as being a snare ; fear to love one’s wife and children too much, lest we lose them by a jealous God’s determination that we shall love only him, “ and enjoy him forever ; ” fear of the sweet-souled Son of Man, for he is to be our judge ; fear of death, for it ends probation and fixes our eternal state ; fear of hell, for it is a place into which the saints can see, but none can go for rescue, even if being in heaven had not diverted every tender affection of their human lives. These were the manifold fears which moved men of old to love God. Even Carlyle quotes with approval the bitter proverb, “ Thou wouldest do little for God if the Devil were dead.”

Well, the Devil is dead. Are there few that serve God ? We answer, The age is profoundly religious. Profoundly religious, though it has repudiated a trembling timidity, and declares for the soul’s right to know God unhindered by any fear. It matters nothing to the aspect of the sunrise and its day, and nothing to the quiet evening with its stars that Copernicus reversed the procession of the planetary system, and plucked the still earth from the centre and set it spinning on the levels of the lighted path which now it must obediently follow. Men still look eastward for the lamp which lights them to their labor, and westward for the flaming signal which bids them go to rest. The facts remain when all their definitions change. God himself is “ constant to a constant change.” So religion grows. Its wider heaven invites it, and stoops to welcome its approach. Long ago it was written that ‘ perfect love

casteth out fear, for fear hath torment. He that feareth is not made perfect in love." So it has come to pass, since love is the supreme grace of life, since love is the test of relationship between God and his children and between those children themselves, since love is God's other name, which we use when the old name has lost its meaning. So it must be true that love, casting out fear, grows to fill the place which was occupied by fear, and turns to do the duties which fear, the cripple, could not do.

The new motives for religion shine by contrast with the old motives, in that the religion of to-day repudiates fear. It is not afraid of human nature; for it is the very ground of religion, and grows that religion as native to its soil.

It is not afraid of the consequences of sin; for since they cannot be escaped nor evaded in any world, religion declares for life dedicated to the will of God. Of sin it is afraid, as one might fear a wild creature not yet tamed.

Religion now is not afraid of life, for it is not so much a probation nor a discipline as it is an opportunity and a delight. It is not afraid of life's tenderest and purest relationships, for "in their face do we behold the Eternal." The humanities of God visit us in love's daily sacraments, and we are purified as we commune with God, calling him by household names; and when upon our common life fall its common sorrows, we do not fear the hand of God is on us. We rather believe that underneath us are "the everlasting arms," and we "commit our souls in well-doing unto him as unto a faithful Creator."

Thus shred by shred our fears fall from us; and our souls are "not unclothed, but clothed upon," for already "mortality is swallowed up of life." Thus the new watchword of religion is love. Its new expression is life.

But the change appears not alone in this deepening confidence in God as in his world; but it declares for life

here and now, between men the bond of obligation and the guarantee of justice. The old view put religion first and morals second,—not in their order, which is the order of Nature, but in their importance, which is not the order of Nature. Religion is before morals, as God was before man ; but the apprehension of religion must be ever in the terms of human relationships, so that the new motives of religion are finer than the word spoken only lately in a Christian church, in which it was declared to be “safer to accept baptism with a life astray than to lead a good life and forego that saving sacrament.” It was prescribed as a greater safety. Men who feel the new motives refuse to be safe, and pray to be doomed to the company of the good, wherever they may be. And to this end religion in its sanest moments ceases to be too introspective or speculative or transcendental. All these it may be, according to the genius and temperament of its subject ; but first of all, it declares its business to be the adjustment of human relations, “the making the world a better place to live in.” It is first ethical and then spiritual. It finds more of God in the righting of wrong than in the mystic reveries of a secluded sanctity. For this reason in all the churches the life of the man “who went about doing good” places the beautiful pictures of the Beatitudes so constantly before reverent eyes that already the pure in heart begin to see God, and to see him unconfused by any theory of his Being or conflict of his attributes. Religion is so busy bringing in the kingdom of man, making it, as the Son of man declared it should be, the very kingdom of heaven, that we have been much turned away from settling nice questions of the employments of God “before all worlds,” the administration of God in this world, and the destiny of God’s children in any world. We have thus put the duty of religion into the present tense, and have made “the

stern daughter of the voice of God" more than the echo which it must be to the Pharisee and Scribe of any age. We no longer quote much. The verdict of those who heard the great Teacher was the verdict of the convicted mind. He speaks "as one having authority." Religion fails of its audience and of its mission when it becomes a mere echo of full words spoken long ago. It has come to pass that this focalizing of enthusiasm in the present and the near future has changed the whole outlook of religion, has given a new purpose to the Church, has intensified the sense of work to be done in the ministry of religion, has even simplified and clarified the very vocabulary of prayer.

Of course, as a result of all this, it is said, "Theology has become shallow," "The queen of the sciences has lost her throne." This last is true; for the throne was deserted by the court, and the court has been repudiated by the people, and the monarchical system of priestly and learned rule is passing away, and we of this age are witnessing a revolt of reason which will lead eventually to the commonwealth of free souls.

But the other claim, that theology has become shallow, deserves a word of recognition. Was theology ever other than shallow since those earliest days when it left the adoration of the ultimate good, and determined in fanciful speculation what the ultimate good was like; when it discussed with wrath and blows whether "one begotten of the unbegotten inherited the unbegottenness of his begetter"? Was it less shallow when it left the Greek intuition of God as immanent, and pitched upon the Roman imperial conceit of God as regnant and magisterial? Is it more shallow now that religion is slowly and painfully feeling its way back again to the larger thought of the Greek, as alone large enough to match the universe

new-discovered by those who have sailed that "sea of darkness" which modern science has bravely crossed? Is theology in its Seminaries likely to become more profound, when it turns from the preparation of men for the ministry of religion, and appeals to courts of law, secular and ecclesiastical, to confirm it in its investments, that it may "live by bread alone" rather than by "every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God"? Has the profundity of theology satisfied itself when it has matched unspeakable mysteries to unanswerable questions? Does it feel vindicated by setting standards of judgment for its missionaries in those very particulars which the moment he lands among a more enlightened heathen the missionary must never remember or learn to forget?

No. The answer to all this claim against the new motives which move men to religion, that they lead to a shallow theology is simply this: Speculative theology always was and must be shallow. The deep-sea soundings of the life of God show nothing brought up from that abyss. We move about the errands of our little lives upon the surface of this profound of being. We have forgotten the day we set sail. We do not know on what shore we shall land at last. We are carried willingly forward by that breath of God that "breatheth where it will." We rejoice to feel the tides of the Eternal Spirit lift and sway us; but when we would sound this awful depth, our plummet swings in the shifting currents of the surface near the hand which holds it, and the silent deeps of God give back no word. The new motives for religion match themselves to the oldest in this: "Thy way is in the sea, thy paths in the great waters, thy footsteps are not known." "Thy righteousness is like the great mountains. Thy judgments are a great deep." Justice and judgment are the foundation of thy throne." Compared with these

deliverances of the most ancient and the newest faith, the superficial guesses about God that are elevated to the authority of knowledge strike the reverent soul as profane, — a hindrance at once to the purity of religion and the strength of reason.

It has been well said : “The dissolution of a mythology is no less natural a process than its growth, and is indeed secured the moment we have discovered how it has grown. To see its construction is to feel its dissolution ” (Martineau).

That which may be said of any mythology applies to all theology on its speculative side, and its hindrance to real religion is in the exact proportion in which it declares its definitions final and all contradiction of them a breach of orthodoxy. We have not long gone by that date which celebrates the nailing of Luther’s theses to the door of the church in Wittenberg. The experience of four hundred years has confirmed the great truth which he thus enunciated :—

“ I will be free, and not give myself prisoner to any authority, be it that of the Emperor or the universities or the Pope, in order that I may confidently declare everything which I recognize as truth, be it maintained by a Catholic or by a heretic, whether a Church Council has accepted it or rejected it.”

Thus Luther, harried by theological experts and ecclesiastical inquisition, spoke ; but Channing spoke for the same large interpretation of human liberty in the interest of a deeper religious life when he said : “ The right to which we are bound is not insulated, but connected, and one with the infinite rectitude and with all the virtue of all being. In following it, we promote the health of the universe ” (Note-book).

Or again, it may be said in the language of a great

teacher of the present time, “The paramount aim of religion is to seek with all our might the highest welfare of the world we live in, and the realization of its ideal greatness and nobleness and blessedness” (Professor Edward Caird). This is but an elaboration of the golden rule announced by Emanuel Kant: “Act as though the principle by which you act were by your will to become a universal law of Nature.”

How easy it seems for religion, hearing these utterances of inspired spiritual life, to lay aside all crutches which are offered to its robust activity! It is not lame nor maimed nor feeble. It stands erect, and exhorts its fellows to freedom with the words:—

“Lean not on one mind constantly,  
Lest where one stood before two fall.  
Something God hath to say to thee,  
Worth hearing, from the lips of all.  
“All things are thine estate, yet must  
Thou first display the title-deeds,  
And sue the world. Be strong, and trust  
High instincts more than all the creeds.”

What does this brief contrast of the “old motives to religion” with the motives called “new” leave us for our strengthening as religious men and women?

The old motives were based in definitions concerning God and man, as at variance. The new motives show God and man sharing the same life and embraced in the same unity of being.

The old motives sought a means to reconcile God to man. The new motives beseech man “to be reconciled to God.”

The old motives bade man fear God, and love him in the midst of fear. The new motives show God as man’s best friend by no persuasion, but by consciousness of love

that casteth out fear. “ He puts his hand into the hand of the Infinite Ally.”

The old motives measured religion by intellectual accuracy as judged by standards in the keeping of a class. The new motives measure religion by human sympathy judged by the nature and necessities of man.

The old motives had for their inspiration the mediation of a unique personage, who came between God and man. The new motives hail this revealer of God who comes between God and man only as the lenses of the telescope come between the eye and the stars.

The old motives bade us love God for what Christ had done, and left us worshipping Christ for what God had done, thus reversing by the logic of the heart the dictates of the schools. The new motives lead to a worship of God which has for its opening sentence, “ Each man shall find God for himself,”—Jesus of Nazareth and all his brothers in the spirit alike in this divine task.

The old motives summoned us to obedience by commands of an external law. The new motives win us to obedience by loyalty to laws which are written in our nature, and read in the highest and dearest relations of life. The old motives were regulative and provisional. The penalties came early in their messages. The new motives are constitutive and constructive, and their penalties are not present to any mind which loves the truth and serves it.

The old motives were an invitation to happiness in a remote and vague heaven. The new motives declare “ God to be the happiest being in the universe,” and all souls to be glad here and always with his joy.

Thus the man whose religion has become a passionate devotion to the will of God, has put away from him, as irreligious in themselves and tending to irreligion, all motives that are grounded in self-interest and in distrust of

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the order of God's world, all motives that are simply regulative and a compromise with the weakness of the baser nature, all motives that shut the soul away from immediate communion with the fatherhood of God, all motives which separate and estrange the brothers of the race, all motives which separate life into secular and sacred, present and future, earthly and heavenly. The man who thus dedicates himself to the religion of to-day finds in its newer, clearer, stronger motives abundant compensation for what may seem a loss to those less devoted to reality.

If it be said to such a one, This is not Christianity as we see it to-day, he replies : It may not be modern Christianity, but it is the religion of Jesus of Nazareth. But it does not need even that great name to certify it to the experience of the soul. The human soul has a right to its own discoveries. It knows what it has made its own. If it be said that such a test is too much to ask, and must make religion difficult to adjust to practical life, let it be remembered, if this be so, the test of religion is not the practical life of our brute existence, but the practical outcome of our spiritual faculties. Then we answer in that fine sentence of a devoted champion of the newer faith, "In certain noble natures deep thinking and high feeling have become a necessity, and the only deliverance for them is in deeper thinking and in higher feeling."

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